

## **Growth for the Soul**

March 8, 2020

### Scriptures:

#### Genesis 12: 1-4a

*<sup>2</sup> Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. <sup>2</sup> I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." <sup>4</sup> So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him.*

#### John 3: 1-17

*<sup>1</sup> Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. <sup>2</sup> He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." <sup>3</sup> Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." <sup>4</sup> Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" <sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. <sup>6</sup> What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup> Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' <sup>8</sup> The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So, it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." <sup>9</sup> Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" <sup>10</sup> Jesus answered*

him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"  
<sup>11</sup> "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. <sup>12</sup> If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? <sup>13</sup> No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup> And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. <sup>16</sup> "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.



We began our Lenten journey with the concept of preparing our soul on Ash Wednesday and transitioned last week to looking at the condition of our soul as we

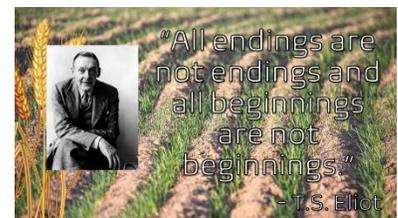
pondered the temptations and sins that threaten our souls. This morning we will look at the initial growth and potential spiritual rebirth that comes when we say "yes" to God over and over. Often this process feels like a fresh start for us, as it did for Abram and eventually for Nicodemus. Let us pray...

Turn with me to Genesis 12 as we dive into the start of Abram's story. The passage begins with God asking him to move to a new land. Much is unsaid yet still implied in God's request. Abram is called to leave his father's family and what has been his home for many years, to set off for some unknown land. That alone would be hard. But at 75 years of age? I imagine he was about ready to

“retire” and to settle into a little bit easier stage of life. God promises to *“make of you a great nation”*. Abram is missing a couple of key ingredients though. He has no children and his wife Sarai appears to be barren. And he has no land. These are two ingredients in becoming a great nation. In spite of these challenges, he packs up everything and follows God’s directions to a new place. Abram takes a step of faith that many of us would find difficult to take. Yet this is part of our call as followers of Jesus, right?

Abram is obedient to God’s initial call but would go on to make lots of mistakes before becoming Abraham, the “father of many nations”. He and Sarai would take matters into their own hands – remember Ishmael? But, as our Lenten devotional points out, God *“took the long view”*. God allowed Abram to grow into becoming Abraham and to grow into a place of deeper trust in God. God gave time and space, plus mercy and grace, in allowing Abram to be ‘born again’, to become Abraham. God wants to do the same thing with us. Thanks be to God.

As people ponder beginning a journey of faith, I think many people ask, “Can one begin again”? There are a lot of reasons people come to this type of question. It was Nicodemus’ question in a way. The answer would be yes and no. Poet T.S. Eliot once wrote, “All endings are not endings and all beginnings are not beginnings”. Life is a journey. It is always possible to start over. No one is every beyond redemption. From our Christian frame of reference, we might say that what we can see is not all there is and



that our end is no real end. Eternity both exists and awaits those who follow Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. In the Christian faith, the dual cycles of temptation and sin, of confession and repentance are both continual loops. Like Abram, we are called again and again to step out in faith and to begin the journey anew. And maybe sometimes we are a bit like Nicodemus who asks can one be born again? Am I still within God's love?



Before turning to John 3 and to Nicodemus, let us consider for a moment Paul's treatment of Abraham in Romans 4. Paul views Abraham's faith as dependent upon his relationship with God and not upon his good works. Down through the ages the church has wrestled with this faith versus works argument. An early climax of this battle came during what is known as the Reformation. Reading two from this past week's Lenten devotional covers the sale of indulgences. During the middle ages, indulgences took the form of good works or the repetition of certain prayers or undertaking a specific pilgrimage. By the time of the Reformation, this had become largely a cash business. In the Catholic world of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the belief was that one could forge an earlier exit from purgatory by the purchase of indulgences. Today we might call these "get out of jail free" cards. The abuse of indulgences was the main target of Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation. Luther's argument for salvation by faith in Jesus Christ alone would become the rock upon which the new church would stand. Sadly though, the church universal continues to struggle with the faith versus works arguments.

Our Lenten journey calls us to leave some old habits, prejudices, and weaknesses behind. That is dealing with the “threats to our soul” that we talked about last week. In doing so, we may ask, can we crawl back into place of innocence and openness, back to place of vulnerability and dependence? Can we be re-formed, re-ordered, re-built to love more, to forgive more, to demand more of ourselves, to see faith and the world anew? As was the case last week with Jesus and as is the case this week with Abram, are there wildernesses that we can step out into when armed with just a little more faith?

As we begin to shift towards the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, I invite you to consider this imaginary conversation

between two twins in womb. One twin is convinced that birth is the end and the other twin that it is just the beginning. Which twin is right? Yes, both are correct.



The same is true for us as Christians. When we are born again, life as we knew it ends and new life begins. Our old self dies, and we are made into a new creation. This process, when repeated, leads to growth for the soul.



Growth almost always comes after each stage or rebirth.

In the general sense, rebirth occurs in many ways for different people. We can become “new” people due to

health changes, to changes in our bodies, to changes that occur with our jobs or vocations or with where we call “home”. Many of the changes we experience that fundamentally change life are just small tastes of the spiritual rebirth that we ponder today as we seek to align ourselves more closely to God’s plans for

our lives. Today's story of what it means to be reborn comes in John 3 as Nicodemus, a Pharisee, comes to see Jesus at night. Please join me in your Bible or in the pew Bible as we look at John 3.

Nicodemus begins the conversation by acknowledging Jesus' connection to God. In verse two Nicodemus says, *"Rabbi we know that you are a teacher who has come from God"*. Yes, some of the religious leaders believe that Jesus is like Elijah or Daniel or one of the other prophets. They are men who come from or are sent by God. What is Nicodemus' proof? He says, *"No one can do these things that you do apart from God"*. Nicodemus is really saying that no one could perform some of these miracles without God's help. Please be aware that he is walking a fine line here. He acknowledges that Jesus is from God without naming him as the Messiah. Then, without a question being asked, Jesus seems to know the deeper reason that Nicodemus has come to him. In verse three Jesus tells him, *"Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above"*. Reading this verse with our 21<sup>st</sup> century eyes, we interpret it as being born of the Holy Spirit. But Nicodemus is not there.

He is confused by Jesus' statement. He asks Jesus how one who is old can be born again and how can anyone enter the womb a second time? Today people ask similar questions – how can God save a person like me? How could God ever love someone who has done what I've done?

Patiently, Jesus rephrases his own statement. In verses five and six we read, *"No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit."*



*What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit*". In other words, if all we are is flesh, then flesh we shall remain. However, if we invite Jesus into our lives, then through the power of Christ, we are born of the Spirit. In the church, baptism comes to play a role. In baptism the person, or in some cases the person's parents, confess faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and make a commitment to live out holy and devout lives. God's response to our commitment is the gift of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.



At this point in our passage, about verse nine, Nicodemus is very confused. He does not understand what Jesus is saying. Nicodemus cannot assimilate this new understanding into his old Jewish understandings. So, in a way, Jesus circles back around to the basic truth, to the core of the good news. In essence, Jesus starts back at the beginning again and uses something that Nicodemus would understand to bridge the gap to this new teaching. Jesus draws Nicodemus back to Numbers 21, reminding him of how Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert. After the people had sinned by complaining against God and against Moses, God sent poisonous snakes among the people. Many died. Moses was then instructed to fashion a model of the poisonous snake and attached it to a pole. If someone was bitten, they could look upon the pole and they would be saved. Nicodemus would understand this connection between being lifted up and being saved. Jesus then goes on to connect this idea to when he will be lifted up on the cross. In looking up to him, in believing in him, Jesus tells Nicodemus that one will find salvation and eternal life. This is a learning that will take time for Nicodemus.

It does not happen this night for Nicodemus, but growth does begin and slowly he becomes a disciple of Jesus. Tradition has it that this is the same Nicodemus that speaks on Jesus' behalf before the Sanhedrin and is the man that comes with Joseph of Arimathea to take Jesus' body from the cross to place it in the tomb.

Jesus continues to point Nicodemus in that direction as our passage for today draws to a close. In verse sixteen Jesus tells him plainly, "*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life*". Jesus clearly states that the purpose of his life was so that God could give his own son as the atoning sacrifice. The sin that we cannot erase, Jesus erases for us. The debt we cannot pay, the bad deed or foul word or poor choice that we cannot do enough good works to cover – his blood covers them and washed them away. In paying the price for our sins, Jesus makes the way for all who believe in him to be able to have eternal life. This would align with Nicodemus' understanding of who and what a Messiah is. He is not quite there yet with Jesus. That growth will come though. It will take time. Like with this young plant, it will take time to grow into mature grain, ready for the harvest.

In the closing verse, verse seventeen, Jesus begins to paint the picture for Nicodemus of how the Savior is not the same as the God of the Old Testament. Jesus is beginning to reshape Nicodemus' Old Testament thinking into New Testament thinking. Jesus did not come to condemn the world, but to save it. Instead of judgment and punishment, Jesus was concerned with confession and

repentance and eventually with us being born again. Instead of condemnation and death, Jesus offers forgiveness and life. This was a radical shift in thinking for the Pharisee inside of Nicodemus. In time he will make this shift.

In one of our devotional readings for this week, author John Birch equates this rebirth to “completely radically” becoming a new person. Would that be how you describe the change that has happened inside of you since you accepted Jesus as your Lord and Savior? Are you completely and radically a different person? I hope so. Or maybe you are just starting the journey. Wherever we find ourselves along our faith journey, we should be ever growing. That is what will happen when we allow ourselves to be born of the Spirit.

This growth process will happen repeatedly when we allow the Holy Spirit lead and guide our lives. Through Jesus’ indwelling presence, the growth of our faith will continue as we will be reborn and reborn, again and again. In doing so we move closer and closer to knowing ourselves as our relationship with the one who loves us and finds us lovable without condition grows. This kind of love is known as agape love. It is the unconditional and unlimited love that God has for each of us. It is with love that God pours into each of us, helping us to grow in our faith. As we work through the season of Lent, looking within and seeking to die to self so that we can be more like Jesus, we will experience growth for the soul. May the Lord bless you as you journey towards becoming more like Christ. Amen and amen.

**GPS – Grow, Pray, Study**

- 1) Grow. Like the wheat seeds that first sprout new life, where might God be at work beginning some new growth or life in your faith journey?
- 2) Pray. Where might God be asking you to “go” like Abram went? Spend some time in prayer and discernment this week.
- 3) Study. What other passages speak of Jesus’ work not to condemn the world but to save the world? How do these apply to you personally?